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THE RELIGIOUS AND MORAL SITUATION IN FRANCE

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PARIS

IN reading various American periodicals I have noted the interest with which French affairs are followed on the other side of the ocean, but American observers seem to be somewhat uncertain in their opinions about contemporary France and particularly to be baffled by the internal policy of France. For this policy differs profoundly from that which was pursued before the war. The attitude of the French government in religious affairs has been considerably modified. It may therefore interest American readers to learn something about the great currents by which the religious and moral spirit of France are today borne along, and to try to divine their probable outcome.

I

The dominant fact beyond question is the political supremacy of the peasant class. The destinies of France have always been subject to the influence of two very different social elements, the population of the cities and the population of the country.

The rural population has always been numerically by far the more important; France is essentially a nation of peasants. But before the war the political and intellectual guidance of the country was in the hands of the urban population, notwithstanding its numerical inferiority.

The French peasants, very industrious but often very poor, were engrossed in hard labor in the fields. The working-men and the people of the middle class filled the whole political

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stage, and their ideas and prejudices were taken to be those of the whole French people.

Fifteen years ago, in most of the cities, these ideas were in general anticlerical and even antireligious. There were societies of free-thinkers whose members pledged to one another their word of honor never to set foot in a church and not to summon a priest at the hour of death. It seemed self-evident that an intelligent man could not believe in God. M. Poincaré, the future President of the Republic, speaking of Professor William James's book on the *Varieties of Religious Experience* said in the French Academy: "We hear these narratives with the same kind of interest with which men listen to the tales of travellers recounting strange journeys in the heart of Africa!"

The rural populations retained more respect for the Church and religious things, but they were unable or unwilling to oppose the separation of Church and State somewhat rudely effected in 1906, by which all the churches of France were left in a very precarious situation from a legal point of view and prevented from creating for themselves a solid financial organization.

Now all at once the war has brought the rural population of France into the primacy of influence. It has gained this rank in the first place by its immense sacrifices. It was the peasants far more than the industrial laborers who shed their blood. Of one million four hundred thousand dead, one million were peasants.

In the smallest rural communes of France are to be seen to-day memorial monuments, inscribed with the long lists of those who died for their country. "Passer-by, bow thy head," reads a beautiful funerary stone erected in a little village in the valley of the Garonne, "There were sixty-five men of this village who died for thy freedom." The village had fifteen hundred inhabitants. In another village of three hundred inhabitants, twenty-two were lost. Of another rural commune, the schoolmistress wrote as early as April, 1916, "Here the men between twenty and thirty have all been killed except two."

But while the war carried off a million French peasants it did not a little to develop and emancipate this whole social

class, which is the prop and stay of French society. In his furloughs the peasant travelled everywhere in France; he is acquainted with Paris and the large cities where he was treated in the hospitals. He learned to handle the most delicate and the most dangerous weapons in the trenches. He knows the value of words and the value of things. Henceforth he will not allow his vote to be captured by lawyers from the town; he has his own ideas and looks for men to represent them.

And above all the French peasant has today large material interests to protect, for he has gained prodigiously in wealth.

During the war it was among the manufacturers and laborers in the cities, among the ammunition makers, that most of the profiteers and *nouveaux riches* were found; but since the armistice French industries have slowly become involved in difficulties, and the wages of the working-men in cities have been somewhat reduced, while the peasant has seen the price of the products of the soil steadily rise.

To stimulate the production of wheat, the government promised to buy the harvest at a price fixed in advance, and in 1920 this price was one thousand francs the metric ton, which was four times the price before the war. The French peasant has also rapidly freed his land from the mortgages by which it was encumbered, and has in very many cases become a proprietor. In one poor arrondissement the peasants in 1919 bought land to the value of ten millions of francs, in another arrondissement nineteen millions, and it is not an extravagant estimate that peasants invested in land in the course of the first year after the armistice three milliards of francs.

Thus France in 1921 is very different from that of 1914. The peasant, grown rich, has become a landed proprietor and profoundly conservative. The Chamber of Deputies elected in 1919 is the most conservative that has been seen for more than twenty years, and has in it the largest number of millionaire deputies. The influence of the city agitators has been completely annihilated by the resolute determination of the peasant class to secure social stability. The socialist party in France has lost much of its power. The railway strike attempted in May, 1920, totally failed, and resulted in the dissolution by

law of the General Federation of Labor, which was proclaimed amid popular indifference. The industrial crisis came in to accelerate the downfall of the French socialist party, now much divided and numerically greatly weakened. The true dictator is today the producer of wheat, milk, meat — the peasant of France.

II

The new situation has favored the growth of the influence of the Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church has always seemed to many Frenchmen to be the bulwark of order and social discipline, and as soon as the results of the legislative elections of 1919 were known, all those who felt which way the wind blew said, "France is going to re-establish relations with Rome."

The first argument that was offered in favor of sending a representative of the French Republic to the Vatican was excellent.

Since the separation of Church and State France has always had to have a semi-official representative to treat with the papal authority on certain matters. In its colonial expansion, for instance, France came into the possession of territories in which the religious interests of Catholics had been committed by the Pope to foreign religious orders. This was the case particularly with Morocco, where the Vatican had conferred on the Spanish clergy the exclusive right to exercise the functions of the Catholic ministry. It was necessary to negotiate directly with the Pope to obtain for French Catholic priests the right to exercise their functions in that French territory. And above all the victory of 1918, which restored Alsace and Lorraine to France restored to it a territory in which the Concordat signed by Napoleon in 1802, that is to say an agreement between the Pope and the civil government, was still in force. It was impossible to apply the Law of Separation to Alsace and Lorraine immediately. But it was equally impossible to leave things as they were because the bishops of Strasbourg and Metz, the two heads of the Catholic Church in Alsace and Lorraine, were of German extraction. It was indispensable

that they should be replaced by French bishops. And this result could not be brought about without conference with the Vatican, the only power competent to nominate Catholic bishops and priests.

Immediately after the armistice, Cardinal Amette, Archbishop of Paris, was sent by the French government to Rome to negotiate for the replacement of the two bishops. In this mission he succeeded, and on the 24th of April, 1919, the *Journal Officiel* of the French Republic published a decree signed by M. Poincaré and M. Clemenceau, naming Mgr. Ruch and Mgr. Pelt bishops of Strasbourg and Metz respectively.

Practical considerations of this sort made an impression on a great many deputies, including even non-Catholics, and it seemed to them essential from the point of view of foreign affairs that France should be represented at the Vatican, not as heretofore in a semi-official and precarious fashion, but officially by an ambassador.

This matter played a considerable part in the election of M. Deschanel to the presidency of the Republic. A certain number of Catholic deputies were bent upon securing a resumption of official relations with the Vatican. M. Clemenceau showed little enthusiasm for this project, and had declared in the lobbies of the Chamber, "With *that* Pope, never!" M. Deschanel, on the contrary, showed himself favorable to the plan, and this attitude brought him some additional votes which assured his election. Immediately after the election of M. Deschanel, Pope Benedict XV sent to the new president a congratulatory telegram.

A few weeks later, on the 11th of March, 1920, the government of M. Millerand introduced into the Committee of the Chamber an appropriation bill for the re-establishment of the embassy to the Vatican.

The discussion of the proposed law was however delayed for several months, and at one time it seemed as though it would have great difficulty in going through.

But at its session in November, 1920, the Chamber of Deputies formally decided to discuss the business at once, and on November 30 the government's bill for the establishment of

an embassy at the Vatican passed by a vote of 397 to 209. The discussion which preceded the vote on the bill was extremely interesting. It was easy to see that some deputies were in favor of it solely for reasons of foreign policy, while others on the contrary saw in the bill a new orientation of the internal policy of France. The Abbé Lemire, in particular, showed that one of the first consequences of the resumption of official relations with the Vatican would be the necessity of giving a legal status to the Catholic Church in France, and of modifying or complementing the Law of Separation of Church and State.

The Law of Separation of December 10, 1905, was a unilateral act; the Vatican never officially received a denunciation of the Concordat on the part of the French government. After the passage of the law, the French government ceased to pay a stipend to Catholic bishops and priests, and theoretically took no interest in their appointment. The Catholic churches were left at the disposal of the faithful by mere toleration. But in a legal point of view these edifices are in a very uncertain situation, and the destruction wrought by the war, which makes necessary the rebuilding of hundreds of Catholic churches in the devastated regions, has emphasized the precarious character of this situation. Whose property will those churches be, when they are rebuilt by the gifts of the faithful?

It is easy to perceive the danger of considerations of this kind. If France should modify the Law of Separation of 1905, discussions and controversies without number will arise and the public peace runs the risk of being seriously compromised. The operation of the law of 1905, notwithstanding all its defects, has given France religious peace. What would a modification of that law bring? All sorts of extravagant demands are possible. Certain Catholic deputies have already spoken of the necessity of giving to the Church an indemnity for the money loss which it sustained in 1905. They revive a claim long asserted in the Catholic Church, namely that the payment to Catholic priests and bishops by the French State is a debt which it owes them in compensation for the surrender of ecclesiastical properties in 1789. In short, there have reap-

peared in these discussions some of the most extreme claims of the Catholic Church, and the discussion leaves the impression that this bill might be followed by others no less important.

The President of the Council, M. Georges Leygues, has declared that the laws of the Republic are not to be meddled with, and that so long as he was the head of the government nothing should be done to impair them; but he was not willing to commit himself definitely in regard to the consequences of sending an ambassador to the Vatican.

In the course of the discussion one of the arguments most frequently advanced by opponents of the plan was the outrageously neutral attitude — at times even an attitude favorable to the Germans — of Pope Benedict XV. Neither the entreaties of Cardinal Mercier of Belgium nor the presence of an English minister, Sir Henry Howard, who was secretly intrusted with the interests of France, were able to bring the Pope to pronounce an explicit condemnation of the way the Germans carried on the war and their deeds of violence in Belgium.

Why should victorious France re-establish relations with the Pope who had refused to do her justice in the hour of peril?

Curiously enough a Catholic deputy, M. Louis Guibal, took it into his head to justify the reserved and timid attitude of the Pope during the war by comparing it with that of the American nation. He recalled the fact that France had to wait a long time for American intervention; that it had for many months by repeated and numerous missions to strive to interest the American people in the justice of the Allied cause. He recalled that President Wilson is reported to have said in church in New York that it was not in the power of any wise man to pronounce a judgment, and that the part of neutrals was to bring the enemies together, rather than to aggravate their quarrels by taking the side of any one of those who are engaged in the struggle.

Words, says M. Guibal, whose wisdom was not at that time disputed by anyone, falling from the lips of the man whose moral leadership seemed for a moment about to replace even that of the occupant of the Vatican, and become universal — words uttered in perfect good-faith, words which even now I do not assume the right to criticise, still less to condemn. I conceive

that at the moment when that great citizen uttered these words they corresponded, it may be to the ignorance in which he still was about certain facts, or to the profound conviction that a power of a moral order, when it is, and is bound to remain, neutral, was bound to preserve an equal respect for those whom it was not competent to condemn, if it had not in its hands the evidence which would permit it to do so.

This attempt to justify the too cautious attitude of the Vatican will probably surprise Americans as much as it surprised Frenchmen. If it be true that President Wilson long hesitated to take sides during the war, it is also true that when the facts made the right clear to him, he did take sides with the utmost determination, and that when the decision was once made, the American nation followed its President with an incomparable energy and will to win the war. On the contrary, no word, no deed, no crime could shake Pope Benedict's resolve to maintain silence. Our American readers will understand after this quotation how strongly resolved the French Catholic deputies are today to restore the moral prestige of the Pope in the face of public opinion which was alienated from him during the war. They will understand also how greatly public opinion in France has changed since the day when President Wilson was acclaimed in Paris. At that moment the moral supremacy of America in France was uncontested, and it seemed as if the Protestant powers, the United States and England, were going to give to European nations their own moral ideal.

The disillusionment caused by the refusal of the American Senate to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and become an active member of the League of Nations has led some minds to turn back to the Catholic Church, which on other grounds attracted all those who were alarmed by the spread of democratic ideas. The comparison drawn by M. Guibal has this much truth in it, that the moral leadership of Europe has already partially reverted from the American nation to the Roman Papacy.

There may be observed, in fact, a general campaign in Europe and in France, the object of which is to elevate the material position of the Papacy, and above all to give it political guarantees which at present it lacks. The dream of some would be to make use of the League of Nations to settle the territorial and political status of the Papacy. Thus, by an un-

expected turn, the League of Nations would serve to strengthen the position of the Vatican.

The following noteworthy declaration was issued in October, 1920, by the Catholic Press Bureau, which represents the most exalted aspirations of the French Catholic world:

The day may come when Italy would consent to have the status of the Papacy made the subject of discussions between the two parties, instead of being evolved by a Parliament, and when it was revised to have it receive the collective assent of all the Powers. The independence of the Pope would thus be guaranteed by the unanimous signature of all Christendom; it would assume the aspect, no longer of an Italian question, but of an international question. It would be one of those political realities in support of which the League of Nations would interpose with all the weight of its influence at any time when there was reason to apprehend that the territorial power installed in Rome might fail to keep its agreements. Political thinkers who have faith in the League of Nations are inclined to admit that under certain circumstances it might, in the name of certain principles of higher equity, limit the absoluteness of national sovereignty, and oppose the arbitrary exercise of such sovereign powers. A novel conception, certainly, and singularly contrary to the jealous claims of the old *Raison d'Etat*! But Italy would give a good example to the world by accepting this friendly coöperation of the League of Nations for the moral security of Christian opinion. A great step would then be made toward the establishment of the *Pax Romana*.

This *Pax Romana* encounters, it is true, vigorous resistance in France itself. The law providing for the sending of an ambassador to the Vatican filed in March, 1920, was not passed by the Chamber of Deputies until November 30. It still awaits ratification by the Senate, and it does not seem that the ministry of M. Briand is in any great haste to see it carried through. Most probably it will be enacted by a small majority; but the opposition of those who are against the resumption of official relations with the Vatican will deprive this result of much of the significance the proposal at first seemed to have. It will remain an act prompted by foreign policy, and will not mark a radical modification of the religious policy of France. It is extremely unlikely that France will ever adopt a Catholic policy, seeking to create in Europe a Catholic *bloc* by an alliance with the populations on the Rhine, Bavaria, and Austria, concluded under the auspices of the Vatican, as some have unwisely dreamed. France will continue as heretofore to make of its entente with England and the United States the basis of a

democratic and progressive policy. The republican form of government is above all attacks, and cannot hereafter be overthrown. The war has indeed taught the French Republic the importance of religious and moral factors in the world. The heads of the French government are today more regardful of the influence of the churches — the Protestant churches as well as the Roman Catholic Church — and are more polite in dealing with the powers of the churches. They will send an ambassador to the pope. But no one could dream today of extinguishing the proud spirit of intellectual independence and the liberal convictions of French citizens. France will remain the great democratic hearth-stone of Europe, the nation that best preserves its poise between autocracy on the right and demagogic anarchy on the left.

III

While social and political circumstances are thus in certain ways favorable to progress in the churches of France, it must not be forgotten that a grave difficulty threatens to paralyze their efforts, namely, the acute difficulty in the filling up the ranks of the clergy. Catholic churches and Protestant churches alike are today confronted by the same difficulty — heavy losses in men through the war, lamentably insufficient support for the ministry. In the country the recruiting of the clergy has almost completely stopped. While a peasant earns very large wages, the Catholic priest sometimes receives only six francs a day, and a Protestant pastor with a family to support, ten or twelve francs. Here also the war, by bringing the whole male population of France in contact with city life and disclosing to them all the gains of industrial callings, broke up the traditions of country life. The children of the soil no longer set their ambition on entering the ranks of the clergy. In certain rural dioceses the recruiting of the Catholic clergy has sunk almost to zero. Aged priests are serving two or three parishes; what will happen after their death? Cardinal Amette said, "Give us priests, churches, schools, but above all priests!"

The war, it is true, developed a mind for religious things in a great many men who lived for long months with the thought

of death daily present to them. This has led many grown men to the religious calling. The great Catholic Seminary of Paris has in 1921 about 360 students, a number which it had never before reached. And what is still more remarkable, among these 360 students there are 85 who had already made their start in another profession. We find among them a colonel of the general staff, fifty officers of the army, four naval officers, six engineers, manufacturers, tradesmen, etc. The resort of students has been so great that it has been found necessary to decline to admit forty foreign applicants of English speech and numerous Orientals. Thus the large cities are furnishing numerous candidates of every age to the priesthood, and if the recruiting of the Catholic clergy taken as a whole remains insufficient, it may be hoped that the lack of numbers may be compensated in a measure by the quality of the recruits.

The Protestant churches have had a similar experience. They also have difficulty in finding pastors for the country churches. But upon the benches of their seminaries also sit officers, men wearing the ribbon of the Legion of Honor, grown men laying aside a profession upon which they had already entered to serve the church. The number of theological seminaries has been raised since the armistice from two to three; Strasbourg having been added to Paris and Montpellier. And in addition to the seminaries, various theological schools have been opened especially for the training of evangelists, missionaries, young women, and the like. The number of students of Protestant theology in 1921 is materially larger than 1914, it reaches almost 150 — a high figure, when it is remembered that the number of active pastors is only 1100. But these recruits do not yet suffice to make good the losses of the war, nor the exodus of those who leave the ministry for lay professions that yield a less inadequate support. The rural population has not yet come to the point of making sufficient sacrifices to keep their churches alive and secure to their ministers a situation worthy of their calling.

By degrees priests and pastors slip toward the cities, while the country parishes are deserted, in part by reason of the

indifference and avarice of their inhabitants. In this there is a great danger for the future. If the country population of France should cease to be Christian, if the principles of justice and brotherly love should cease to be held in honor there, the moral equilibrium of France would be greatly imperilled; it would be ready for all sorts of revolutionary adventures.

This peril is perceived by very many, and the French Christian youth of today is far from being apathetic and indifferent. Students in the universities and the higher schools frequently feel themselves called to a sort of temporary apostolate. They take to posting bills, distributing tracts, holding lectures, writing for the press, in behalf of the good cause. In Protestant circles in Paris the movement, *La Cause*, gathers a steadily increasing number of enthusiastic students, men and women, who devote all their leisure to spreading evangelical principles. Parisian Catholic circles have devoted themselves to the *Œuvres de Midi*, or professional *Guildes*, which bring together in each quarter young women who leave their places of work between noon and two o'clock for their mid-day meal. These guilds include a lunch-room, besides rest-rooms and halls for lectures. They have a strictly confessional and Catholic character, and priests preach short sermons in them. There are at present the *Guilde St. Mathieu*, open to the employees of banks; the *Guilde Ste Marie de l'Aiguille* for dressmakers; the *Guilde Ste Madeleine* for the girls in perfumery shops; the *Guilde St. Honoré* for those who are employed in food shops. In all these groups there are zealous, faithful souls, ready to make all sacrifices for their associations.

Thus contemporary France has in the religious field the same difficulty as in all other fields of national activity — a lack of men for middling and obscure places. In the cities there is a blossoming out of enterprises, and an enthusiastic and zealous body of youth; but the great rural masses are as yet untouched by these movements. A considerable number of young people from the cities go, it is true, to find in the country remunerative positions, and they contribute to raise the intellectual level of the inhabitants of villages. The future will belong to

those who know how to elevate and direct the spirit of the French peasants. These peasants, more enlightened, better off, and with greater desire for knowledge, need intellectual and moral leaders of the first quality, filled with truly apostolic faith and zeal. When they shall have them, France will resume an eminent place, if not the foremost, in the intellectual and moral world.

The friends of France may be reassured. The country has almost recovered its mental equilibrium. The sound traditions of labor among its peasants have preserved it better than any other country in Europe from the social Utopias that frequently follow a great war. The Russian revolutionary propaganda has completely failed, and the moderate and conservative elements are much more powerful than before the war. There was even for a moment reason to apprehend that France might abandon its high liberal traditions to submit to the yoke of Rome. But that will not be. A prouder and a truer conception of the spiritual independence of the state and of the churches is already gaining ground. France will find a way to give to the Catholic Church, as to the Protestant churches, a legitimate place; not an unfavorable place as in recent years, and not a privileged place such as some have imagined. The spiritual forces, like material forces, of the nation are weakened, and in particular it will require years to train all the spiritual leaders of whom our youth has need. At no moment of the war was the moral quality of France seriously impaired. That collapse of all ideals which our enemies expected as the prelude of French defeat never came. Gratitude for this is due to all those who were the spiritual educators of the nation, and who kept its soul up to the level of the exigencies.

In the years which are to come, France, always eager for new inspirations, will be looking for guides in the world of thought and faith. May the influence of America, so enthusiastically exalted among us in 1918, and still so beloved, so potent in France, be among those which shall assist our country to form for itself high ideals of spiritual greatness! It is not to no purpose that France has recently sent one of its most famous

generals to render homage to the memory of the Pilgrims of the Mayflower. Wherever in the world moral greatness, liberty, and heroism are to be found, France desires to be present and to receive the lessons of history. The uniting of the spiritual patrimony of the two great republics may save the world of tomorrow just as the uniting of their material forces saved it yesterday.